

Tourism education in an emerging digital economy: World experience and perspectives in Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT

Worldwide tourism education is being promoted by various national and international agencies to achieve sustainable development goals. The presence of tourism education is tremendously growing in international universities. The results suggest that as per the academicians alongside with tourism professionals, the tourism education is highly relevant for economic development. It also shows that tourism education in Uzbekistan, is general a matter of course and specialization-based tourism programs are near to absent.

This article is not focused on the criticism of reforms in legislation and their functionality, but rather on introducing possibilities which may present an alternative to developing and realizing projects along the lines of innovation in Uzbekistan. The question is how vocational training schools and institutes of higher education, specifically training programmes in tourism and hospitality, have changed and are changing now that the new laws on education, on vocational training. What kind of future can these institutions look forward to, what will they be teaching and in what conditions, especially, in time and after pandemic CoViD-19? This question applies equally to theoretical and practical training.

Key words: *tourism, education, platform, online teaching, online learning;*

1. Introduction

The human resource with talent, skills and work experience from tourism industry is very essential for the success of tourism industry. Level of education have an important role in organizing and cooperation of a community towards sharing and implementing an idea. Tourism generates thousands of jobs in various businesses. Specifically, with regard to tourism industry, career avenues can be divided into five areas i.e. accommodation, food and beverage services, recreation and entertainment, transportation and travel services. The challenge for tourism education is therefore to prepare graduates to work in these complex, value-laden, socio-political environments where they can proactively and positively contribute to developing forms of tourism that progress the objectives of sustainable development. Tourism education opens the way for how a tourist destination prepares the human resources to be able to work professionally in developing the tourism sectors. Thus, Tourism courses focus on responding to practical challenges within this specific, however complex and highly dynamic, economic sector. Prominent examples of such experiential learning are work placements, teaching restaurants/kitchens, and fieldtrips. Likewise, case study and problem-based learning approaches help students get a better understanding of ‘real life’ situations and challenges.

In fact, the impact of digital technology, particularly in the field of Tourism, is unquestionable and frequently considered a driver of innovation in the sector. Not only does digital technology allow for improved customer adaptation and added-value for the traveller, particularly in terms of travel planning, informed decision-making, orientation on-site, but also for experience enhancement within certain service and destination settings, and last but not least, for experience sharing with others. This increasing role of technology within the travel experience, before, during and after travel, has ‘revolutionized’ tourism. Additionally, digital technology contributes to a more efficient and competitive organization of tourism products that should be understood as complex, integrated experience opportunities, involving a variety of economic, social and cultural actors and resources.

At the European level, the *Joint Research Centre of the European Commission on Learning and Skills for the Digital Era* highlights the importance of “harnessing the potential of digital technologies to innovate education and training practices, improve access to lifelong learning and to deal with the rise of new (digital) skills and competencies needed for employment, personal development and social inclusion”. This effort has been translated into detailed guidelines, such as the DigComp 2.1: The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp) and the Digital Competence Framework for Educators (DigCompEdu). At the same time, according to the World Economic Forum’s report: “The greatest societal impact may be the effect of digital transformation on the travel workforce, which could represent as many as one in every 11 jobs worldwide by 2025. Intelligent automation will change the nature of some travel jobs and eradicate others altogether”. In this scenario, it is vital for Higher Education Institutions, especially in the field of tourism (and hospitality) education, to keep pace with enduring digital transformation.

The Internet information space is easily available and accessible worldwide to travellers, tourism industry agents, but also researchers, teachers and students, and has become increasingly complex and dynamic. Considering this, the use of digital technologies enhancing efficient communication and articulation between the different Tourism actors within destination networks and markets should be recognized as valuable for business success. For this part, students need to understand the role and potentialities of digital technologies, but they also need to know how to use them, to be better prepared for their future positions within the tourism system. And finally, it is also important that research addresses this ever-changing framework and provides evidence for finding adequate, efficient and sustainable uses of digital technology in Tourism Education. Taking this into account, this study aims to present the results of a literature review focusing on evidence of digital transformation within Tourism Education, outlining best practices and trends, highlighting key findings, thus paving the way for research and practice in the area.

The design of a model with the objective of organizing the teaching of Tourism in Uzbekistan is a perceived need by the various stakeholders in the education system. This model could include many variables inherent to the complexity of the system of tourism, which we highlight in this article and which result from the conjunction with the national scientific and educational systems. In fact, we intend to assume the defense of the necessity of recognizing the status of scientific/academic tourism, due to its increasing relevance in the Uzbek higher education institutions.

2. Methodology

This study is of an exploratory nature and focuses on finding evidence of how digital transformation is making its way into Tourism Education. It follows a literature review methodology, focusing on peer-reviewed, open source, recently published research. Data was gathered based on the following criteria: I) The selected databases were to include international, open access, scholarly peer-reviewed journals; accordingly, the databases selected were B-on, Directory of Open Access Journals, Eric, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, European Union Digital Library, Scopus and Web of Science;

II) The search terms were ESP, Tourism Education, Higher Education, digital technology;

III) the search was restricted to the timeframe 2017 to 2020;

IV) the documents had to be written in English.

The search was carried out between 1st and 8th May 2020. The results were then reviewed to eliminate duplication. This process yielded 84 documents from a variety of sources: Directory of Open Access Journals – 5; Google Scholar – 35; Research Gate – 2; Web of Science – 1. A through content analysis based on relevance as to evidence of digital transformation within Tourism Education resulted in the selection of 18 documents.

3. Research

As pointed out in many of the studies analysed, there is a clear trend towards digitalization in Tourism (and Hospitality) Education. Chiao, Chen and Huang (2017) state that digital technology acts as an important means of introducing innovation for Tourism organisations, practitioners and educators. In this scenario, it is important to understand how Tourism Education is keeping pace with the ubiquitous nature of digital technology and its development, as well as the promotion of the teachers' and students' digital proficiency.

Regarding the delivery modes, Lugosi and Jameson point out that some teachers still fear that online learning will replace face-to-face teaching, in the sense that it may discourage students from coming to class. This seems to be a red herring, since the literature suggests that online materials are mostly used "for revision and assignment preparation rather than as a substitute for lecture attendance" (Lugosi and Jameson 2017, 166), and that students enrolled in blended-learning seem to receive the best of both worlds. The first Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) in Tourism and Hospitality dates from 2013. In fact, there has been a continuous increase in the offer of this course format since then.

In fewer cases, the interest in experimenting with technology-based teaching and learning environments and the willingness to share expertise also seem to be important reasons to opt for this delivery mode.

In educational settings, the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes is dependent upon the user's perceptions of competency and the quality of the actual learning and teaching material, and its mode of delivery. Only half of the instructors intended to repeat the experience of teaching in the Online-learning format in the future, especially because of the overwhelming workload involved in their design and implementation. In fact, the combination of online and face-to-face learning seems to allow some of the constraints of the adoption of Tourism (and hospitality) to be minimised, namely: the insufficient hurdle role of students assessments in qualification verification, their inadequacies in training and assessing higher-order practical competencies, and the unfulfilled role of learners as co-creators and co-assessors.

Teachers and students regard the use of digital technology in tourism education settings as inevitable; nevertheless, the former recognize the need for understanding how the latter learn through digital technology in order to bring richness and complexity to the 'traditional' learning experience and to overcome the digital

divide between teachers and students. Given that the use of digital technology in education (in this case, in the field of Tourism) is neither universal and standardised, nor immutable, the studies had been analysed in this research identified shortcomings and potentialities of its use in specific cases. Even though the results of these studies are not intended to be generalisable, the categories and indicators presented in Table 1 and Table 2 reflect key aspects that should be taken into account in future efforts to integrate digital technology in Tourism Education.

Figure 1. Advantages of using digital technology in Tourism Education.

Category	Indicators	Studies
Advantages	Keeping track of students' performance and providing feedback	Cheung, Wan and Chan (2018); Xiao, Qiu and Cheng (2018)
	Promoting equity among students	Chiao, Chen and Huang (2017); Schaffer (2017)
	Prompting more integrated/multidisciplinary learning	Chiao, Chen and Huang (2017); Lugosi and Jameson (2017)
	Fostering immersive/authentic learning	Chiao, Chen and Huang (2017); Patiar, Ma, Kensbock and Cox (2017); Schaffer (2017) Schott (2017); Enticknap-Seppänen (2017)
	Reinforcing students' professional identity and awareness	Enticknap-Seppänen (2017); Padron, Fortune, Spielman and Tjoei (2017); Schaffer (2017); Patiar, Ma, Kensbock and Cox (2017)
	Fostering student-centred, flexible learning	Patiar, Ma, Kensbock and Cox (2017)
	Enhancing students' intrinsic learning motivation and engagement	Chiao, Chen and Huang (2017); Enticknap-Seppänen (2017); Lugosi and Jameson (2017); Patiar, Ma, Kensbock and Cox (2017); Xiao, Qiu and Cheng (2018); Schaffer (2017); Schott (2017); Sharafuddin, Sawad and Wongwai (2017)
	Promoting the development of soft skills (i.e. digital proficiency, leadership, communication, social interaction, collaboration, team work, decision making, problem-solving, critical thinking, etc.)	Barbera, Garcia and Fuertes-Alpista (2017); Cheung, Wan and Chan (2018); Chiao, Chen and Huang (2017); Enticknap-Seppänen (2017); Lin and Cantoni (2018); Lugosi and Jameson (2017); Padron, Fortune, Spielman and Tjoei (2017);

Figure 2. Constraints of using digital technology in Tourism Education

Category	Indicators	Studies
Constraints	Teachers lack digital competence/proficiency	Cheung, Wan and Chan (2018)
	Students lack digital competence/proficiency	Lugosi and Jameson (2017)
	Students are uncritical consumers of information	Lugosi and Jameson (2017)

	Technology can act as a distractor	Lugosi and Jameson (2017)
	Teachers consider that digital technology decreases student engagement and ‘deep-learning’	Lugosi and Jameson (2017)
	E-assessment and co-creation of content are complex and difficult to implement	Xiao, Qiu and Cheng (2018); Barbera, Garcia and Fuertes-Alpista (2017); Lin and Cantoni (2018)

In general, some teachers seem to have mixed feelings as to the growing role of digital technology in educational contexts. On the one hand, the use of digital technology is perceived by some teachers as a distraction and they felt less confident that students were paying attention to the teaching. They also consider that it contributes to a decrease in meaningful engagement with content, since students are not always capable of critically and accurately selecting and using information provided by search engines.

It is important to point out that the intensification of the teachers’ workload may also prevent them from keeping pace with the development of digital solutions and consequently from innovating in their teaching practice. Training should be able to empower teachers to think about, or work with the technology in more different ways, rather than just teaching them how to use it. Besides, teachers should feel encouraged to use technology-based strategies on account of its ease-of-use and versatility in realising learning outcomes, and especially in meeting the needs of diverse student profiles.

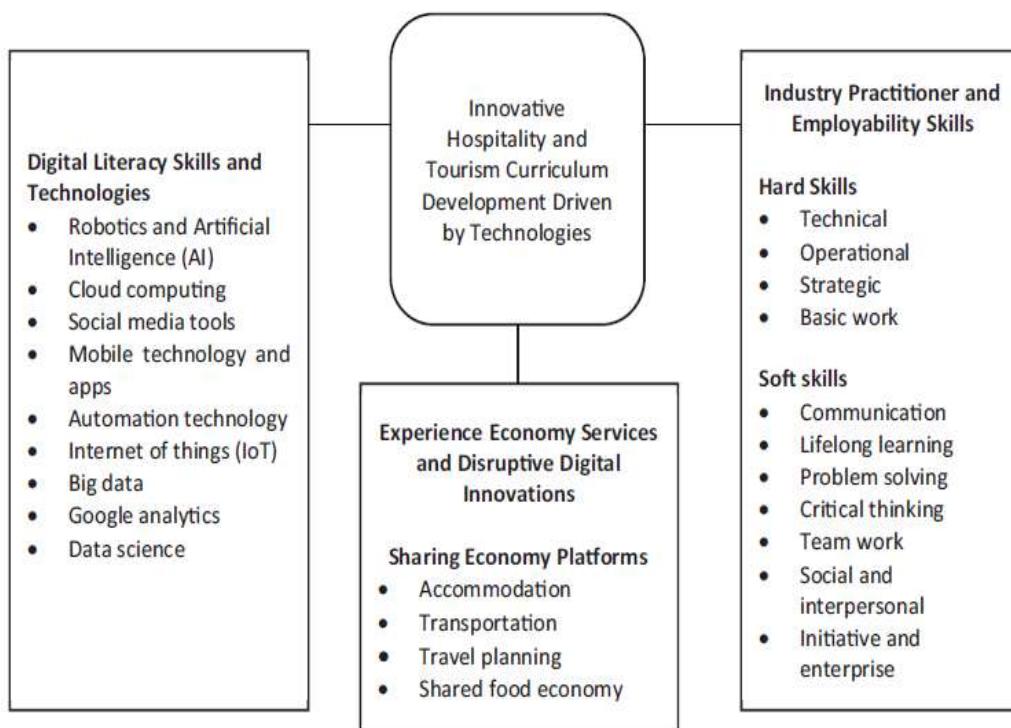
On the other hand, digitalization can promote more integrated and multidisciplinary approaches to teaching and curriculum design. This is only possible if the use of digital technology is grounded on well-defined learning outcomes, enables authentic learning experiences, supports access to multi-format information sources and integrates them in the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, digitalization allows the tracking of students’ performance and the provision of just-in-time feedback, i.e. formative assessment. However, co-design and co-creation of content, as well as teaching/learning/assessment strategies, especially when negotiated between teachers and students, are not easy tasks.

Time and space flexibility are two of the most widely accepted advantages of using digital technology in educational contexts. Virtual reality, in particular, seems to play a very important role in Tourism Education settings, since it offers the adaptability needed for groups of part-time, mature and international students, and meets the self-efficacy component of successful blended learning, and its ubiquitousness favours equitable learning opportunities.

One of the most relevant facets of digital technology, and in particular of virtual reality, is the possibility it presents for the development of situated understanding of contents. Thus, teaching and learning strategies grounded in the use of virtual reality, as well as game-based learning, for instance, support and enhance field work experience based on industry needs, fostering authentic learning experiences through narratives. In fact, virtual reality environments in Tourism are emergent, in particular because they allow for innovation through real-world simulation, subsequently promoting students’ self-confidence and critical thinking. The integration of authentic virtual settings in Tourism Education thus leverages students’ engagement and interaction at a deeper level, boosting their intrinsic motivation. Concerning the development of competencies, Xiao, Qiu and Cheng (2018, 1) point out that the “inadequacies in training and assessing higher-order practical competencies” still remain a challenge and that an in-depth development of soft skills and practical competencies is still not fully addressed in online educational environments. Collaboration-based teaching and learning strategies also seem to be in general avoided in Tourism Education system and that discussion forums and email are the most recurrent tools used as interaction, respectively. Because hospitality was so people-centric, reliance on online delivery meant that key interpersonal and communication skills and technical competencies could not be developed effectively and would reduce students’ employability.

From the students’ viewpoint, the use of social networking tools (such as Facebook and Twitter) could have a positive impact on their learning. Notwithstanding, several authors conclude that there is evidence of the learning effectiveness of technology use, as well as a good acceptance of digital technology within Tourism Education settings, in particular of virtual reality solutions (e.g.: Second Life environments or tour-guiding platforms such as the Cultural Tourism Digital Guiding Platform or InstaVR platform). Thus, virtual reality helps bridge theory with practice, since “prior to joining the industry in the forms of internships, part-time or full-time jobs, participation in collaborative and creative team work involving critical thinking, problem-solving, decision making and knowledge creation is very important”. Moreover, game-based learning strategies grounded in virtual reality also minimise emotional barriers to communication and promote a higher level of engagement.

Figure 3. Innovative technologies framework for hospitality and tourism curriculum development



4. Conclusion

When pandemic CoViD-19 damaged both in the industry and in students' lives, it is important for Tourism Education to embrace digital transformation, keeping up with the developments and changes in progress not only in Uzbekistan, but over the world. This study makes a valuable contribution to the on-going discussion on the need to reshape Tourism Education, by addressing not only the students' but also the faculty members' needs. It reveals a dual focus: on the use of digital technology in the teaching and learning process on the one hand; and on the other, the development of digital competence in context – and both are regarded as crucial for current and future Tourism professionals. It also makes a valuable contribution to other fields of higher education, which are grappling with similar pressures and challenges regarding distance working/learning/studying.

The multiple delivery modes supported by technology and the range of available learning platforms like Edmodo, Google Classroom, Moodle and Canvas not only offer a more personalised range of options for learners, but an opportunity for a wider access to Tourism (and other) Education for diverse and non-traditional publics. Despite the reluctance on the part of often hard-pressed teachers to adopt technology-based methods and learning settings, the studies analysed here reveal that blended learning solutions can offer the most advantage to learners and future professionals.

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